

NEWS | IMMIGRATION

Sex Workers Are Being Abducted by ICE — and Abandoned by Respectability Politics

Sex workers targeted by ICE need the migrant justice movement's full solidarity.

By Kate Zen & Chanelle Gallant, TRUTHOUT

July 12, 2025



An ICE officers badge is seen as federal agents patrol the halls of immigration court at the Jacob K. Javitz Federal Building on June 10, 2025, in New York City.

MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO / GETTY IMAGES

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Since January 2025, police raids on massage parlors have intensified, targeting immigrant women suspected of sex work. Amid nationwide protests against Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), these workers — among ICE's most systematically targeted — are largely excluded from community defense.

“I’m scared to go to work,” a migrant massage worker in New York City [told](https://heyzine.com/flip-book/da17f6dcf1.html#page/2) <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/da17f6dcf1.html#page/2> Red Canary Song, a New York-based collective of Asian and migrant sex workers. “Police cars, plainclothes cars, all hide when [we] see them ... we’ll be arrested as soon as we go out.”

On June 11, ICE and local police in [Baton Rouge](https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ice-conducts-worksite-inspections-baton-rouge-massage-parlors) <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ice-conducts-worksite-inspections-baton-rouge-massage-parlors>, Louisiana, raided nine massage parlors, detaining 10 Chinese women — their names and whereabouts have not been released. They disappeared into ICE’s sprawling detention system, with facilities from the U.S. to El Salvador and South Sudan. Yet not a single organization called for their release.

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Over 90 days in January and February, nearly 1,000 arrests in [Queens, New York](https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/0-mayor-adams-provides-90-day-progress-of-multi-agency-operation-address-urgent-public) <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/0-mayor-adams-provides-90-day-progress-of-multi-agency-operation-address-urgent-public>, targeted immigrant sex workers and street vendors. In [Arizona](https://www.azfamily.com/2025/02/20/200-suspects-arrested-human-trafficking-operation-scottsdale) <https://www.azfamily.com/2025/02/20/200-suspects-arrested-human-trafficking-operation-scottsdale>, over 200 arrests were made. In Texas, 11 parlors were closed in [February](https://www.expressnews.com/news/article/massage-parlor-close-texas-san-antonio-20144727.php) <https://www.expressnews.com/news/article/massage-parlor-close-texas-san-antonio-20144727.php> and [May](https://www.tdlr.texas.gov/media/pressrelease/2025-05-27-eight-massage-est-closed-for-suspected-human-trafficking.pdf) <https://www.tdlr.texas.gov/media/pressrelease/2025-05-27-eight-massage-est-closed-for-suspected-human-trafficking.pdf> under emergency powers that [bypass criminal charges](https://versustexas.com/blog/massage-parlor-raid/) <https://versustexas.com/blog/massage-parlor-raid/>. Across 20+ cities this year, police collaborated with ICE in similar raid

Most go unreported, buried in sealed indictments. In Sanctuary Cities, ICE exploits [legal loopholes](https://www.nilc.org/articles/how-ice-blurs-the-line-between-enforcement-of-civil-immigration-violations-and-enforcement-of-criminal-laws) <https://www.nilc.org/articles/how-ice-blurs-the-line-between-enforcement-of-civil-immigration-violations-and-enforcement-of-criminal-laws> to deport people through administrative channels, without judicial oversight, masking the true scale of its operations.

In other labor sectors, worksite raids sparked massive outpourings of solidarity and creative resistance, including [“Adopt a Day Laborer”](https://ndlon.org/adopt-a-day-labor-corner/) <https://ndlon.org/adopt-a-day-labor-corner/> campaigns and [street vendor buyouts](https://www.nbclosangeles.com/local/groups-buy-out-street-vendors-amid-ice-raids/3726132/) <https://www.nbclosangeles.com/local/groups-buy-out-street-vendors-amid-ice-raids/3726132/>. But sex workers are left to fend for themselves.

Few immigrant rights organizations defend migrant sex workers. Support mainly comes from other sex workers underfunded grassroots groups like [Red Canary Song](https://www.redcanarysong.net) <https://www.redcanarysong.net>, [Trans Immigrant Project](https://maketheroadnyc.org/issue/tgnciq-justice/) <https://maketheroadnyc.org/issue/tgnciq-justice/>, and [DecrimSexWorkCA](https://www.decrimsexworkca.com/home) <https://www.decrimsexworkca.com/home>, the last of which has [organized ICE patrols](https://www.instagram.com/p/DLc8oOvJVTR/?igsh=ZG04ZGhpdHNncGc4NncGc4) <https://www.instagram.com/p/DLc8oOvJVTR/?igsh=ZG04ZGhpdHNncGc4NncGc4>, and distributed over \$20,000 in [emergency relief](https://www.decrimsexworkca.com/mutualaid) <https://www.decrimsexworkca.com/mutualaid> to undocumented and other sex workers since 2023. Their model is mutual aid, not charity.



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COMIDA CALIENTE SERÁ PROVEÍDA

Specifically created for immigrant sex workers in New York City, this flier presents information from a Know Your Rights training that the Trans Immigrant Project created, explaining how to safely report sexual violence from police.

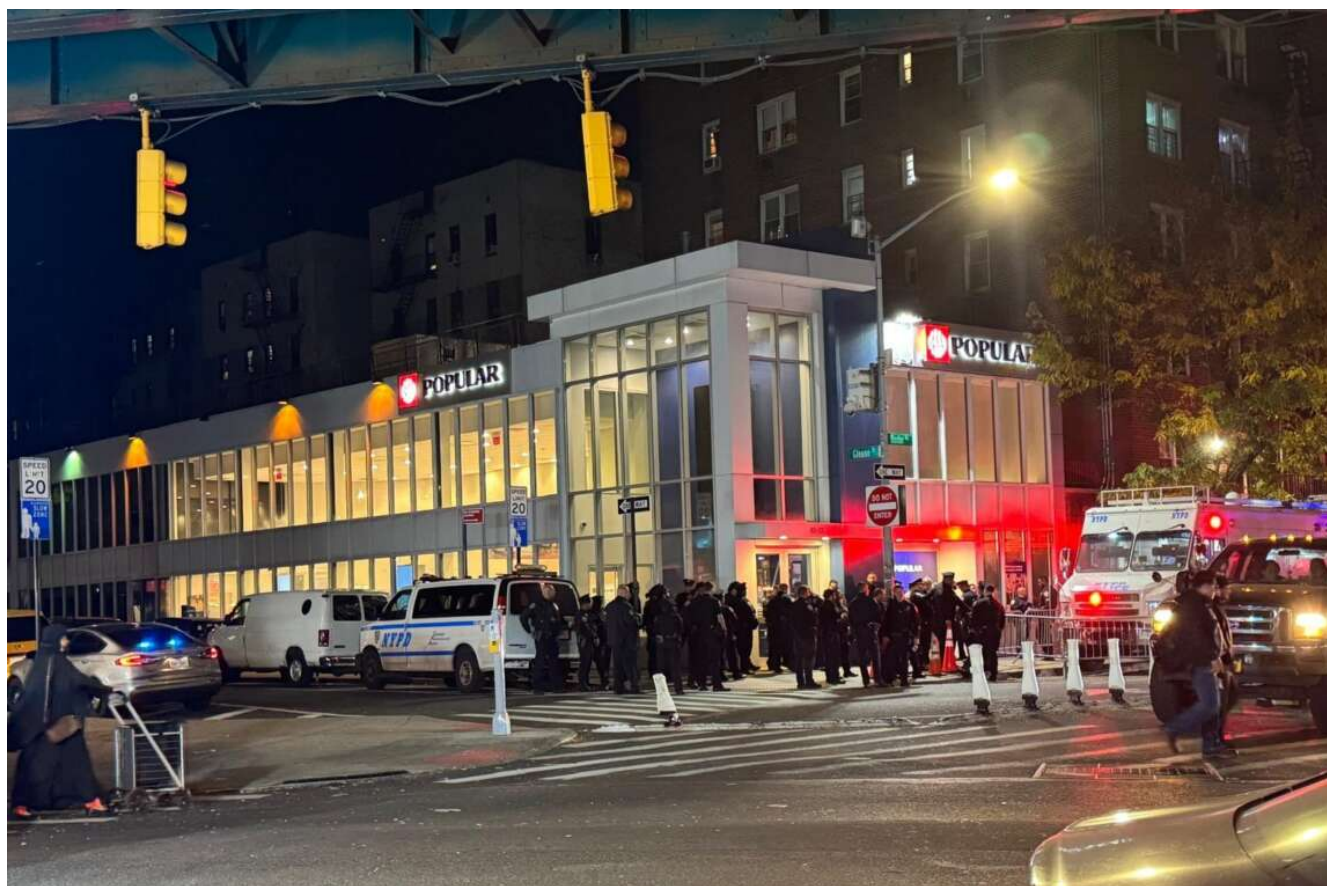
COURTESY OF MATEO GUERRERO

“Our undocumented sex worker fam are terrorized and without resources,” wrote Cocoa Makati, coordinator of DecrimSexWorkCA. Sex work is migrant women’s day labor; massage parlors are their “Home Depot.” Street-based sex workers are street vendors. Like other precarious workers, they build safety networks to resist raids.

But the broader immigrant rights movement calibrates its messaging to appeal to moderate respectability — complying with lines drawn between the “deserving” and the disposable. When ICE targets sex workers, many remain silent.

The result is devastating — masked abductions, multiagency entrapments, worksite raids. To some, these actions appear unprecedented. But for those organizing with sex workers, they’re all too familiar. For years, ICE has used migrant sex workers as testing grounds for its most aggressive tactics.

During Operation Restore Roosevelt (<https://citylimits.org/opinion-operation-restore-roosevelt-failed-queens/>) in Queens, massage workers described “turning to riskier and riskier clients and accepting clients they don’t feel good about,” said Yin Q, a leader organizer with Red Canary Song. They feel “they are being asked to perform more services for lower fees,” she ac





Police officers conduct raids in Jackson Heights, Queens, during Operation Restore Roosevelt in January 2025.

MATEO GUERRERO

Many fear leaving their workplace at night to go home. “They bring vans to arrest people, waiting to fill them. Undercover cops take photos, and patrol officers come after,” said Mateo Guerrero of the [Trans Immigrant Project](https://maketheroadny.org/issue/tgnciq-justice/) (<https://maketheroadny.org/issue/tgnciq-justice/>).

Guerrero described how the intensified raids led to increased police sexual abuse. A trans Latina sex worker was stripped on the street in winter, and mocked in police custody, Guerrero told *Truthout*. Others were forced to provide oral sex in a police car to avoid arrest, Guerrero said. In March, two NYPD officers were indicted (<https://queensda.org/two-police-officers-indicted-for-forcible-touching-and-burglary-while-on-duty-in-jackson-heights-two-police-officers-indicted-for-forcible-touching-and-burglary-while-on-duty-in-jackson-heights/>) for sexually assaulting and burglarizing a massage parlor while on duty.

The broader immigrant rights movement calibrates its messaging to appeal to moderate respectability — complying with lines drawn between the “deserving” and the disposable.

“Sexual harassment is the number two form of police violence,” Guerrero said. “Under Operation Restore Roosevelt (<https://citylimits.org/opinion-operation-restore-roosevelt-failed-queens/>), it dramatically increased.”

Chilling fear spread throughout the community. In vibrant Jackson Heights, known for its LGBTQ bars and Mexican food carts, the streets became empty. “Not just trans folks — the general migrant community was afraid to go out for a beer.”

Despite mounting evidence of abuse, most immigrant rights groups hesitate to support sex workers. “There’s respectability politics because of political conditions, and I understand that as a strategy,” Guerrero said, “but leaving our folks behind is harmful in the long term.”

That’s because policing and deportations begin on the margins — with sex workers, trans migrants, street vendors. Once normalized, these tactics expand to the broader public.

Testing Their Tactics: Following the Money in Anti-Trafficking

Technologies funded to police sex work now monitor everyone. ICE's surveillance tools and ballooning budgets were built over decades by targeting sex workers under the guise of anti-trafficking [.https://truthout.org/articles/special-report-mo-and-lies-in-anti-human-trafficking-ngos/](https://truthout.org/articles/special-report-mo-and-lies-in-anti-human-trafficking-ngos/)).

The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241007025445/http://titsandsass.com/the-jvta-not-just-bad-for-trafficking-victims>) (2015) authorized the creation of the Cyber Crimes Center within ICE, enabling wiretaps and internet surveillance. Between 2014 and 2018, DHS funneled over \$3 million (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/hou>) to local police for license plate readers (<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/247283.pdf>) to combat trafficking — now used in broader workplace raids.

Authorities justified travel bans, surveillance, racial profiling, raids, detentions, deportations, asset seizures, even sexual assault as anti-trafficking measures (<https://www.notyourrescueprojectbook.com>) to protect women and children. But these measures do more harm than good (https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/impact_of_anti-trafficking_laws_pb_nswp_-_2018.pdf), exposing migrants to additional forms of violence (https://www.butterflysw.org/_files/ugd/5bd754_71be1154f6ff4bbb94a03ed7931a32df.pdf). Most funding went to prosecutions and public campaigns promoting false statistics (<https://www.npr.org/podcasts/1033039288/trafficked>) and racist stereotypes (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/wastefulness-of-human-trafficking-awareness-campaigns/>), not victims' services — fueling misguided vigilantism (https://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/shih_vigilante_racism.pdf) and MAGA fearmongering (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/children-sex-trafficking-conspiracy-epidemic/620845>) around child trafficking.

Both Democrats and Republicans supported the expansion of ICE through anti-trafficking legislation. First established as part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the aftermath of 9/11, ICE structured its operations as two departments in 2023: Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO), which carries out deportations, and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), which conducts investigations. This division creates a loophole that lets police in Sanctuary Cities share data with ICE through HSI.

Under Donald Trump’s first term, Congress gave DHS \$819,000 for the “Blue Campaign” (<https://www.govinfo.gov/conter>
[CRPT-115srpt157/html/CRPT-115srpt157.htm](https://www.govinfo.gov/conter)), expanding HSI’s anti-trafficking focus to target massage parlors. Under Biden (<https://www.clasp.org/publications/fact-sheet/biden-dhs-budget-punitive-immigration>), ICE’s 2023 budget increased to \$8.48 ([https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/U.S.%20Immigration%20and%20Customs%20Enforcement_Remediated.pdf)
[files/2022-03/U.S.%20Immigration%20and%20Customs%20Enforcement_Remediated.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/U.S.%20Immigration%20and%20Customs%20Enforcement_Remediated.pdf)) billion, adding \$15 million to its Center for Countering Human Trafficking and \$2 million for surveillance. Today, HSI’s multibillion-dollar budget (<https://immigrantjustice.org/t>
[backgrounder-funding-for-ice-homeland-security-investigations-hsi-is-funding-for-trumps-anti-immigrant-agenda/](https://immigrantjustice.org/t)) funds workplace enforcement operations, fusion centers (<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/ending-fusion-center-abuses>), and joint police task forces.

Law enforcement increasingly uses facial recognition (<https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2025/01/police-use-face-recognition-continues-wrack-real-world-harms>), license plate readers (https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/IACP_LPR_Survey_Results_5.16.22.pdf), Stingrays (<https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2022/07/fbi-stingray-surveillance>), report-icc-and-secret-service-conducted-illegal-surveillance-cell-phones), Mobile Fortify (<https://idtechwire.com/icc-pilots-mobile-fortify-app-expanding-facial-recognition-surveillance-into-u-s-communities/>), and other surveillance technologies — allegedly to help victims of trafficking, but in prac

to build cases for prosecution (https://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/militarized_humanitarianism_meets_carceral_feminism.pdf) and deportation.

State and local law enforcement agencies use Traffic Jam (<https://thenextweb.com/news/this-company-is-using-facial-recognition-to-fight-human-trafficking/>) (Marinus Analytics (<https://www.marinusanalytics.com/>)) to scrape escort ads and match faces to biometric databases without evidence of trafficking. Data brokers (<https://www.theverge.com/2022/7/18/23268592/feds-buying-location-data-brokers-aclu-foia-dhs>), like E Street (<https://www.babelstreet.com/>) and ShadowDragon (<https://www.404media.co/inside-shadowdragon-ice-babycenter-pregnancy-fortnite-black-planet/>), scrape data from over 200 social platforms, including online games and dating websites. Officers use fake accounts to monitor and entrap targets, buying geolocation data and using geofence warrants to monitor their movements. They gather search queries, and metadata from chat apps like WhatsApp, to profile suspected sex workers.

To enhance what they term “early detection,” DHS recently launched StreamView (<https://www.dhs.gov/science-and-technology/news/2025/04/24/streamview-fighting-human-trafficking-real-time>), a program that uses AI to scan livestreams from public cameras (<https://www.404media.co/ice-taps-into-nationwide-ai-enabled-camera-network-data-shows>) for “suspicious behavior” — like walking on streets where known sex workers walk. Ordinary acts become grounds for arrest, when performed by people with short skirts or foreign accents. This practice legitimized profiling and surveilling the public based on patterns, rather than evidence, of criminal activity.

The National Human Trafficking hotline, run by anti-trafficking organization Polaris (<https://blog.palantir.com/how-palantir-ai-supports-polaris-in-its-anti-human-trafficking-work-c604830bcb80>), proudly began partnering with Palantir in 2012 (<https://polarisproject.org/press-release/polaris-project-launches-global-human-trafficking-hotline-network/>). Palantir now holds a \$30 million contract (https://www.democracynow.org/2025/6/3/makena_kelly), to build a “master database” for ICE, and is in talks (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/30/technology/trump-palantir-data-americans>) to develop a larger database on all U.S. citizens.

The One Big Beautiful Bill (HR 1) allocated \$2.5 billion (<https://www.biometricupdate.com/202506/trumps-megabill-expands-biometric-surveillance>) to ICE specifically for AI systems and biometric data collection — including facial recognition, iris scanning, and DNA — shared between ICE, the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, and state law enforcement. Much of this funding will go to Palantir (<https://www.techpolicy.press/how-trumps-budget-bill-sells-out-the-future-to-big-tech/>), which has already secured over \$1.3 billion in federal contracts (<https://www.ainvest.com/news/palantir-government-contracts-ai-expansion-fuel-record-valuations-momentum-2506/>) in 2025. The Customs and Border Protection (CBP) also received over \$6 billion (<https://migrantinsider.com/p/gop-megabill-gives-ice-30-billion>) for the expansion of Autonomous Surveillance Towers (AST) and biometric screening technologies. This bill turns previously small-scale biometric pilots into foundational national infrastructure.

In New York, ICE accessed over 480 plate readers (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/11/ice-car-trackers-sanctuary-cities>), logging 16.2 million scans in a week — tracking people without warrants or probable cause. In California, police shared plate data with ICE (<https://calmatters.org/economy/technology/2025/06/california-police-sharing-license-plate-reader-data/>), despite sanctuary laws. ICE

uses these tools to raid farms, construction sites and food processing plants in Nebraska (https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/06/10/immigration-raids-omaha-ice-food-plant/44cbdb22-4632-11f0-9210-87ee82efcc80_story.html), California (<https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/13/business/ice-workplace-raids-home-depot>), New Mexico (<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/ice-raids-uncertainty-scare-off-workers-baffle-businesses-123002025>), and Pennsylvania (<https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/ice-arrests-17-people-working-apartment-building-bethlehem/4215101/>). The technology that once policed sex workers now targets all migrant workers.

Bad Girls Make History: The Page and Mann Acts

The first U.S. immigration law and the nation's first federal policing agency were both born out of the criminalization of immigrant sexuality.

The Page Act of 1875 barred entry to the U.S. for Chinese women, all suspected of prostitution (https://web.archive.org/web/20230620144813/https://hrlr.law.columbia.edu/files/2021/04/1199_Lee.pdf) — the first law excluding immigrants by race, gender, and perceived morality. It set the stage (<https://www.upress.umn.edu/9780816638048/entry-denied/>) for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which closed the formerly open borders of the country.

The Mann Act of 1910 criminalized interstate travel for “immoral purposes,” a vague category used to police interracial relationships (<https://www.ucpress.edu/books/contagious-divides/paper>) and sex work by targeting Black and migrant men. FBI — the nation's first federal police agency — expanded through the enforcement (<https://academic.oup.com/jsh/article-abstract/35/1/5/1027149>) of the Mann Act. Today's raids echo the same moral panic of the “white slave trade” (<https://www.ias.cu/sites/default/files/sss/papers/paper45.pdf>) — invoking imagined threats and racialized assumptions about migrant immorality to justify broader policing and immigration control.

Mainstream immigrant advocacy champions the “good migrant” — the student, mother, farmhand, and domestic worker. But immigration enforcement began not with “respectable immigrants,” but those hardest to defend. Migrant sex workers defy the “good/bad migrant” binary — and that's powerful. Most Asian massage workers are older women escaping poverty wages in other more exploitative jobs. Sex work is precarious, but for many, it offers more autonomy — feeding families and providing some with the only available startup capital for other businesses like bakeries.

Sex Work Is Labor — and a Line of Defense

As Red Canary Song urgently warns (<https://heyzine.com/flip-book/da17f6dcf1.html#page/18>): “*Neighborhoods at the margins are test grounds for how policing and neighborhood vigilantism can expand and become embedded into the daily life of the city. The plan is to normalize the horror.*”

For years (<https://www.cbsnews.com/texas/news/too-much-touching-inside-the-botched-prostitution-investigations-at-lewisville-pd/>), undercover officers (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/23/massage-parlor-workers-police-threat-safety>) posed systematically (<https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?>

[article=1084&context=ysphtdl](#)) as clients, soliciting services (<https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1158&context=lawineq>) in plain clothes, before arresting sex workers with impunity (<https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1262&context=crsj>) to ear overtime (<https://www.propublica.org/article/nypd-cops-cash-in-on-sex-trade-arrests-with-little-evidence-while-black-and-brown-new-yorkers-pay-the-price>). It's now a national tactic — turning workplaces into traps, as masked ICE agents raid immigrant workplaces to meet federal quotas.

Reversing the expansion of ICE under anti-trafficking rhetoric requires eliminating the legal loopholes that allow local police to collaborate with ICE. It requires removing the 10-year travel ban (<https://novaramedia.com/2023/03/14/sex-worker-being-detained-at-the-us-border/>) and “moral turpitude” (<https://journals.law.harvard.edu/jlpp/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2021/01/Lerner-Moral-Turpitude.pdf>)” cleared from immigration law — a vague provision used to deport sex workers and other migrants for minor nonviolent offenses.

Protecting migrants also means confronting whorephobia, racism, and criminalization. Otherwise, the state will keep using the same fascist playbook: target sex workers and the most marginalized first, then expand its reach to others. Defending the rights of migrant sex workers is essential to a broader movement for immigrant justice.

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KATE ZEN ([HTTPS://TRUTHOUT.ORG/AUTHORS/KATE-ZEN/](https://truthout.org/authors/kate-zen/))

Kate Zen is a first-generation Chinese immigrant, civic technologist, and co-founder of Red Canary Song. A former organizer with the Street Vendor Project, they focus on informal and gig economy worker rights. They've contributed to feminist hacktivist and liberatory tech projects, and served on the Community Advisory Board of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project. At Columbia and NYU, they organized around domestic violence, youth homelessness, and women's economic empowerment. Kate co-founded the Chinatown Literacy Project, directed Chinatown Youth Initiatives, and organized with migrant massage workers at Butterfly in Toronto.



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Chanelle Gallant is a movement writer, organizer, strategist and consultant and co-author of *Not Your Rescue Project: Migrant Sex Workers Fighting for Justice* (<https://www.notyourrescueprojectbook.com/>) (Haymarket Books, 2024). She co-founded the Migrant Sex Workers Project, SURJ-Toronto and has provided training and advocacy on sex work and racial justice, from city hall to the United Nations. Chanelle sits on the national board for Showing Up for Racial Justice and Catalyst Project and has helped to move millions into organizing through donor advising and grassroots fundraising. She holds an MA in Sociology and was a Lambda Literary Fellow. Find her at chanellegallant.com (<http://chanellegallant.com>)